

CANADA'S PIONEER MISSIONARY

by

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FREDERICTON, N.B., IN 1834.

*Rev. R. E. Burpee's store was in the building
to the left where his name is over the door.*

JUST one hundred years ago next April there sailed from Halifax the first Protestant missionary to leave the shores of British North America to carry the gospel to the heathen. The honor of sending out this first missionary belongs to the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces, who at that time were a small and relatively unimportant body.

How came it, then, that the Maritime Baptists gained such distinguished missionary precedence over the larger and older Protestant denominations? Let us glance at the facts.

Days of Preparation

The closing years of the eighteenth century witnessed the organization in England, by a handful of undistinguished Baptists, of the first foreign missionary society and its sending of Wm. Carey to India in 1792. His pioneer service awakened the whole Protestant church to her obligation to carry out the Great Commission of her Lord, and won for him the honored title of "Father of Modern Missions." In 1812 the American Congregationalists sent Adoniram Judson to India, but he turned Baptist on the voyage through his study of the New Testament, and was immersed on his arrival at Cal-

cutta. These two events awakened great interest among the little Baptist churches in the Maritimes. Eagerly did the people devour any missionary intelligence about the work of these pioneers, and the desire to have a share in the salvation of the heathen spread among the people. It found expression in the first collection for foreign missions taken at the Association at Chester in 1814, which amounted to £13 8s. "Mite Societies" were organized to raise money for missionary purposes, the first being established in Saint John in 1818. The reports of spiritual results in India and Burma aroused much enthusiasm among our people. In 1800, after seven years of labor, Carey won his first Hindu convert and in 1820 the heartening news was circulated that one Burman had been converted in Judson's mission. In these conversions Maritime Baptists heard the blessed sound of "marching in the tops of the mulberry-trees," and rejoiced with joy unspeakable. Enthusiasm for the missionary cause grew apace. It reached a new high in the Association at Chester in 1838.

A Heart on Fire

This Association gave special attention to Foreign Missions. Stirring addresses

were delivered by Dr. E. A. Crawley, Rev. I. E. Bill, and Rev. F. W. Miles of Fredericton, N.B. The degraded and lost condition of the heathen weighed heavily on the heart of Mr. Miles and he keenly felt the obligation to obey the Great Commission. While he had mused on the state of the heathen and on the duty of his denomination to do something about it, the fire of missionary zeal and enthusiasm burned within him. Out of a heart on fire for the cause of missions he addressed an arousing appeal to the Baptists to take a more active part in the missionary enterprise. One who heard his fervent address said: "A holy and divine influence seemed to fill the place, and many of us have embalmed in our memories and our hearts the thrilling fervor with which our beloved and lamented brother Miles pleaded for the perishing heathen." He pleaded not in vain. The Association passed a momentous resolution to form "a society for the maintenance of foreign missions," and respectfully urged the New Brunswick Association to organize a similar society to unite with them in providing funds for the educational preparation and the maintenance of a missionary in some foreign land.

A Daringly Unique Undertaking

That resolution was born of marvellous faith. At that time Maritime Baptists were a feeble folk with but meagre financial resources. Their fifty churches had a combined membership of about 5,600. Not only were their number few and their resources meagre, but their proposed undertaking was daringly unique. No Protestant in all British North America had ever gone to a foreign field as a missionary. No one was asking the Association to send him as a missionary, and it is doubtful whether any member of that body knew of a single person who was even considering the question. That day the Fathers acted in exceeding great faith.

The God of missions must have rejoiced in being challenged by such heroic faith. Readily did he verify his promise, "According to your faith, be it unto you." Not long did the Fathers have to wait for a candidate. He was found in the person of the Rev. Richard E. Burpee, pastor at St. George, N.B. He offered himself as a candidate and was joyfully accepted at the Association in the following year. He resigned his pastorate and entered Queen's College now Acadia, in January, 1840, supported by the two Associations.

The First Missionary

Richard E. Burpee was descended from

Pre-Loyalists, his grandparents having migrated from Rowley, Mass., and settled at Sheffield, N.B., in 1764, the year following the general migration of New Englanders to that place. He was the son of Thomas Burpee and Esther Gallop, who were married at Sheffield on January 13, 1789. The father removed from the paternal homestead in Sunbury county and settled on a farm in the parish of Douglas in York county, where Richard E. was born about 1810, though the exact time and place of birth are not definitely known. His spiritual awakening is said to have occurred under the ministry of the Rev. F. W. Miles, who was pastor of the Fredericton church (1834-40) and principal of the old Baptist Seminary (1836-40) in that town. He was baptized into the fellowship of the Fredericton church by Rev. Robert Davis in 1829, at about the age of eighteen.

Soon after his conversion young Burpee felt an irresistible urge to preach the gospel. Almost insuperable difficulties blocked his way, and a struggle went on in his soul between worldly considerations and Christian duty. Already he was prospering in business in Fredericton. Finally the love of Christ so constrained him that he yielded to God's unmistakable call to preach the gospel. He gave up his business and engaged in study, first at Fredericton and later at Horton. After serving for a time in home mission work he was ordained at St. George, N.B., September 7, 1837, and became pastor of a recently organized church at St. Patrick's.

God Always in Advance

Now, in any forward movement God is always in advance of his people. While the Baptists at Chester were making their great venture of faith, the God of missions was preparing Burpee for foreign missionary service. A burning desire to preach the message of eternal life to those who had never heard it possessed his soul. The Rev. F. W. Miles, his father in the faith, had thrown the glowing coals of his missionary zeal into the heart of his spiritual son. Year after year the missionary flame glowed brighter and brighter. The purpose of carrying the good news of redemption to those who had never heard the Saviour's name was definitely formed. But how could he carry it out? Various were the schemes he pondered. Should he offer his services to the American Baptist Missionary Union? Should he tour these Provinces soliciting funds to pay his passage to India and go out in faith that God would supply all his needs? Should he resume business to secure the necessary

funds to carry him to India? In the midst of these ponderings came the word that the two Associations were looking for a man to go to the foreign field after undergoing an adequate training at the newly founded Queen's College, and that both bodies were raising funds for this purpose. Joyfully he said, "Here am I, send me." He resigned his pastorate and entered college in January, 1840. After a successful course, he was graduated in June, 1844.

Watches and Rings Contributed

After graduation Mr. Burpee visited the churches in the interest of the mission. He had formulated a plan to raise the sum of £500 to pay his passage and to support him on his arrival in Burma. Though it was a time of financial depression and the denomination had just gone through the novel process of erecting a college building without money, he met with much encouragement. Out of their scanty means the people gave what money they could; but so great was their interest in sending the gospel to the heathen that men who had no money to give parted with their silver watches and women with their gold rings to send the first Canadian missionary to a foreign land.

Finally, Burpee was ready to sail for Burma. Designation meetings marked with great spiritual power and fervor were held at Horton and Halifax, and on April 20, 1845, a concourse of people estimated at 3,000 gathered at the wharf in Halifax to bid farewell and wish Godspeed to the first Protestant missionary to leave the shores of Canada. After some delay at Boston, he sailed from that port on June 4th and reached Calcutta on September 26th, nearly four months later. He was accompanied by Mrs. Burpee, nee Laleah Johnstone, daughter of Lewis Johnstone, M.D., of Wolfville.

Burpee's Priority

To those who may question the claim that Burpee was the first Protestant missionary from Canada and contend that this priority belongs to the Rev. John Geddie of the Presbyterian church in Nova Scotia, let me remind them that the renowned Presbyterian missionary to the New Hebrides did not sail from Halifax until November 30, 1836, nearly eighteen months after Burpee had sailed from the same port. In fact Geddie was just offering his services to the Presbyterian Board in the very week that Burpee landed in Calcutta. It was not until July 29, 1848, that Geddie reached Aneiteum in the New Hebrides, the scene of his fruitful labors in transforming the whole island from

heathenism to Christianity. There is, therefore, no question but that the honor of sending out the first foreign missionary belongs to the Maritime Baptists.

Missionary Success

Soon after arriving in Calcutta the Burpees proceeded to Akyab on the west coast of Burma and began the study of the Burmese language. They expected to devote their labors to the Kemees, a tribe living about four-days journey from Akyab. With financial assistance from British residents at Akyab Burpee succeeded in erecting a school house and placed a native teacher in charge. Circumstances led him to change his plans and accept the suggestion from American Baptist missionaries to establish himself at Mergui and undertake a mission to the Karens. He reached Mergui early in April, 1847, and began the study of the Karen language. Here another school was opened under the direction of a pious Karen teacher and pupils from the surrounding villages attended it. Soon Mr. Burpee had the privilege of baptizing ten young Karens, pupils of the school in Mergui all children of converted parents.

The Burpees were happy in their work among the Karens and rejoiced in its evident success. But anon a dark shadow slipped over their sun. Mr. Burpee's health broke. Tuberculosis had fastened its fangs upon him. He returned to Akyab and took a voyage to Singapore for his health in 1849. Finally, physicians pronounced his recovery hopeless if he remained in Burma. There was nothing then to do but give up the mission and return to Canada.

Bitterness of Soul

Mr. Burpee has left a record of his feelings in this crisis of his career. Keenly had he felt the pang of parting with the home folk, and on the voyage to Calcutta home and loved ones never seemed dearer to him as hourly the boat carried him farther away from them. Even more deeply did he feel the sorrow of parting from the friends of his adopted home. "It was with far deeper depression of spirit we made preparations to leave our adopted home than the land of our birth. We had toiled for years to obtain a knowledge of the language of the people, in the hope of spending years in preaching to poor heathen the glorious gospel, and we could not see our long cherished hope, in a measure realized in its beginning, dashed to the ground without a bitter pang. And then

the sad condition of multitudes called so loud for light, for the gospel, that we could not hear its thrilling voice and feel that we must turn a deaf ear to the cry, and take our departure, without bitterness of soul."

The Burpees reached Nova Scotia, May 17, 1850. It was hoped that a rest in the homeland would improve his health, but this hope was foredoomed to failure. Though weakened in body, he worked for the mission among the churches and pleaded pathetically on the floor of Convention in 1852 to be sent back to his beloved Karens. He longed to go back and labor and die among them. The Convention refused to take the risk. The emaciated countenance, the hectic flush on the cheek, and the hollow cough assured the delegates that death had already laid its heavy hand upon him. His health still failing, he went south to escape the rigors of the Maritime winter and died at Jacksonville, Florida, February 26, 1853, in his forty-second year, far from home and loved ones, in the land of the stranger. There his ashes rest to this day, but his record is on high.

In Burpee the missionary hopes of Maritime Baptists had been fixed. Greatly had they rejoiced and been heartened by the early success of the mission. The failure of the missionary's health and his untimely death were, consequently, a great disappointment and sorrow to them. They had laid their first great sacrifice on the altar of foreign missions. However, they were not disheartened but believed that the souls won at Mergui were worth more than all the sacrifice.

Dr. Cramp's Tribute

It is fitting to close this sketch by quoting Dr. J. M. Cramp's tribute to Burpee:

"Mr. Burpee was a sincere, ardent Christian. He loved the truth; its power was exhibited in his life; his affections were sanctified; and as a friend, a husband, a father, he illustrated the influence of the gospel.

"As a minister of Christ he was affectionately earnest. That was his characteristic. It was not intellectual might—nor brilliant imagination—nor acute reasoning—but serious earnestness; the eloquence of the heart. And its choicest theme was the love of the Saviour.

"He was a genuine missionary. His tenderness of spirit eminently fitted him for the work, and he understood and loved it. When actually engaged he displayed the self-denial and heroism of the true missionary character; and so anxious was he to regard his discharge from labor as merely temporary, that he repeatedly urged the Missionary Board to restore him to the scene of toil, even though it should be necessary to leave his children in this country. He could adopt the Apostle's words. 'Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.'

"He did not live in vain. Souls were saved there by his instrumentality. It was God's will to save them. It was his will that brother Burpee should be the instrument, and that he should go from Nova Scotia to Burma for the purpose. Was not even one of those souls worth more than all the expense?"

